

SOCIAL MEDIA IS NOW AN ELEMENT OF GUEST SERVICE



By, Michael Biesemeyer, Founder and CEO, Swerver, LLC

Michael Biesemeyer spent 18 years in the foodservice industry as a server, learning the ins and outs, before becoming a social media advocate. His company, Swerver, teaches operators to use social media as a business tool.

We manage the social media presence for a \$20 million portfolio of Silicon Valley-based restaurants. One of our accounts, Sams' Chowder House, has been heralded in tech media as a Facebook marketing success story, and was cited by Sheryl Sandberg, the COO of Facebook, during their 2012 quarterly earnings call to investors. For more information, email info@swerver or visit www.swerver.co.

From gourmet food trucks to fine dining, we serve social media to thousands of fans daily. After two and a half years in the trenches, here's what we know:

It's 2013. Social media is now an element of the overall guest experience.

Sit with that for minute. It's critical. In most cases, the people who "like" or "follow" your brand online are your most loyal guests offline. You pay staff to answer the phone, greet, seat and serve your guests. These same guests need to be served on the social web just as they would be in your restaurant.

If your business commits to it on that level, other decisions around budget and execution will fall into place. You'll know whether or not you have the resources in house or if you need agency help. Recognize the effort, skill and creativity that's needed to do this effectively and be willing to pay for it. Whether it's crafting copy for status updates, engaging with fans or shooting and editing food pics, whatever you do, put your best people on it.

People first taste your food online. Invest in food photography.

Facebook has just optimized both its desktop and mobile user-interface for photos, Twitter let's you upload images, OpenTable just bought a food photo sharing startup, Yelp allows users to upload their own shots, and Pinterest is all about visuals. Your restaurant needs to put out a steady stream of great food images and other compelling shots that are optimized for sharing on these sites. This is not the same as shooting specials with your smartphone. You need properly lit, properly edited images. Your guests will eat them up and come back for more.

This doesn't have to be expensive. There are plenty of talented photographers who are willing to negotiate on price or even trade, but know that you get what you pay for. You might save money going with an amateur with a limited portfolio, but their lack of professionalism and efficiency could cost you in the end.

Consider hiring a photographer who will shoot on a monthly or even bi-weekly basis, depending on how often your menu changes. Unlike your website, where content can stay relatively static, your social media presence needs fresh, constant updating.

Start with one or two social media platforms, master them, and then add more. Take a hard look at your current strategy and consider consolidating your effort and investment onto one platform. If your restaurant is going to do this right, start small and be consistent. Become really fantastic on just Facebook, for example. Cultivate a page where your guests can find fresh content.

If you're worried about monitoring chatter on sites where you are less active, use a tool like Social Mention to play defense.

Relax. This is the hospitality industry.

You're five steps ahead of everyone else trying to do social media because you already understand that guest service and making people feel special drives the growth of your business. Bring that spirit to your social media efforts, share great content and be responsive. It's what your fans will appreciate most.